

# Addressing Challenges for LGBT Elders

By Olivia M. Hall

Aging brings many challenges, but for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals, those challenges may be especially daunting. Speaking recently at Cornell about "LGBT Elders: Issues and Trends," Lisa Holmes, director of the Tompkins County Office for the Aging, gave an overview of the added social and legal hurdles faced by LGBT people, even in Ithaca's vibrant LGBT community, and some of the work that is being done in the region to address these problems.

In recent decades, the LGBT community has undoubtedly become more visible and accepted in the U.S.. "LGBT baby boomers in particular have changed and continue to change institutions and systems," Holmes says. And as this generation begins to enter retirement and old age, the particular needs of LGBT elders are receiving more notice.

Because of past and continuing social stigma, LGBT elders are twice as likely as their heterosexual counterparts to live alone, and three to four times less likely to have children, Holmes explains. For this reason, their social networks may look very different. "They may be comprised of a network of close friends rather than their family of origin. If someone is hospitalized, you might find a river of people coming in with covered dishes to share, and they may all be from the women's or men's community."

Economically, LGBT men and women often find themselves at a

disadvantage as they deal with employment and institutional discrimination, says Holmes. Without federal recognition of same-sex partnerships, they may not access many benefits that their heterosexual counterparts enjoy, including social security survivor benefits, joint tax returns, or joint-and-survivor pension options. As a result, LGBT elders are more likely to be poor while being denied many impoverishment protections.

Yet, providers of elder care often lack awareness of these different circumstances and sensitivity for LGBT individuals, says Holmes. "It's sometimes a challenge to find competent healthcare professionals, particularly in emergency situations. We've heard stories in the past about discriminatory events that took place because of some staff members' lack of understanding. That can make for a very unwelcoming and uncomfortable environment for people on the other end of it who are relying on those individuals for care."

As a consequence, LGBT individuals are significantly more likely than heterosexuals to delay seeking health care or not to do so at all (29 percent versus 17 percent, respectively), according to a 2007 analysis by the Center for American Progress. And thus the vicious cycle continues, Holmes says. "Across upstate rural New York you would often hear: 'We're a small rural community, we don't have any LGBT elders.' But that's a self-perpetuating thing, because if people aren't providing culturally competent care, people don't want to come out."



Photo by Olivia Hall

Lisa Holmes, director of the Tompkins County Office for the Aging, speaks at Cornell.

In 2002, long-time community activists Nancy Bereano and Candace Widmer founded the Tompkins County Working Group on LGBT Aging in order to address these issues in their own region. Comprising volunteers from the LGBT community, the nonprofit group fosters ties to such local institutions as the Office for the Aging, Lifelong and the Ithaca College Gerontology Institute. Its mission: "To ensure that local LGBT elders receive quality community services responsive to their particular needs."

The group has assembled a training curriculum for local service providers for the aging. "None of us on the working group were trainers by profession," Holmes says,

"but we educated ourselves on how to deliver the information and all the points that we wanted to cover."

In trainings offered at such institutions as the Cayuga Medical Center, Family and Children's Services and Hospicare, the working group explains recommended practices for workplace nondiscrimination policies, client rights, complaint procedures, intake and assessment procedures, confidentiality, and staff training. "Showing that the facility is thinking about these things can be a marketing tool for providers," Holmes notes. "It would make me want to live in one place over another."

On the other end, the working group hosts social and educational events for the LGBT elders themselves. At potluck suppers or attend educational seminars. Here they learn about wills, healthcare proxies and powers of attorney—tools that are critical for anyone, but especially for LGBT elders, according to Holmes.

Donna Stokes, who attended Holmes' presentation at Cornell, has completed the major paperwork with her partner. "Legally, we've made sure we're entwined as much as we can be," she says. The couple has also made use of the benefits that individual states and businesses have extended to same-sex partners in the absence of federal protections. "I'm very, very fortunate," Stokes adds, "because I work here for the state [through Cornell], and my partner has Corning Inc. benefits."

At the national level, it is a sign of progress that the Tompkins

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# Bridges

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of suicide.

"Many suicides are the result of an acute crisis and have an element of compulsivity," says Dr. Tim Marchell, director of Mental Health Initiatives at CU, who conducted research on bridge means restrictions for the BMRP. "Most communities don't hear about suicide because suicide often occurs behind closed doors and the media does not publicize those deaths as suicide," he says. "However, when someone jumps to their death it's a public tragedy that many people are made aware of, leading communities to believe that these suicide tragedies occur more often than they do."

Marchell notes that evidence suggests publicizing these deaths as suicides can lead to the "suicide contagion effect," evident in a stream of public gun shootings across the U.S. "I was able to find that if you can prevent a suicide by jumping, you are preventing a visible suicide which carries a greater risk of imitative behavior," he says.

One side of a community debate related to bridge means restriction was that if barriers are installed, a suicidal individual will simply go

somewhere else to jump. "Barriers generally have not been found to displace those attempting to commit suicide to jump from other locations, though there may be some risk of displacement if there are comparable bridges nearby," says Marchell. "Therefore, our research consultants recommended that we treat the campus area bridges as a single iconic site."

Peggy Beach, senior director of CU Campus Relations, was one of six people on the Bridge Means Restrictions Committee. "The committee actively worked on this project for two-and-a-half years," she says. "It's been interesting to tackle a mental health crisis by finding a practical solution that turned out to be a unique construction project. We believe the solution will serve the greater community in which we exist."

## History

Continued from page 1

ple that look like them." It's also essential for kids of all races to see African-Americans doing great things, she adds.

Two of her role models, Beverly J. Martin and Corinne Galvin, are in "Inspiring Individuals." "I moved here from Harlem when the Ithaca City School District was

looking to hire teachers of color," she notes. "If Beverly Martin hadn't encouraged me to stay here I probably wouldn't have." What Clarke-Maynard admires most about Galvin, a Cornell graduate and Ithaca College professor, was how she did things that were unheard of in her time, such as teaching African-American history at Southside Community Center. "Many young people today have never even heard of her," Clarke-Maynard says.

Duffy stresses that the exhibit offers only a small sampling of information that the History Center has available on the local black community. She urges anyone who finds someone or something that piques their interest to learn more by visiting the archives. With that in mind, the History Center plans to do a similar display each February. Clarke-Maynard supports this idea. "The more you continue to engage young people the better. I'm going to make sure that all the kids I volunteer with in different community groups know about it," she says.

"Inspiring Individuals: African Americans in Tompkins County" can be viewed at the History Center on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. through Feb. 28. Admission is free. For more information contact Duffy at 273-8284

# LGBT

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working group can now consider itself part of a nationwide network of similarly-minded organizations. At the helm is SAGE (Services and Advocacy for LGBT Elders) in New York City, which has grown over the past three decades to become the national clearinghouse of information for aging providers and LGBT organizations, as the group states on its website. In 2010, federal recognition for the importance of this work came in the form of a \$900,000 grant to seed the creation of a National Resource Center on LGBT Aging.

"We've seen leaps forward in terms of attention to this topic," Holmes says. "These issues are seen as civil rights or equality issues, and the economic disparities that people face are getting recognition."

In his second inauguration speech, President Obama seemed to agree: "Our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law—for if we are truly created equal, then surely the love we commit to one another must be equal as well."

For more information, contact Holmes at 274-5482, or visit [www.sageusa.org](http://www.sageusa.org).

## Impressions

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Pilkey also counts the uptick in unprecedented extreme weather events as another indicator of global warming. Forest fires have not only increased in frequency, but they've extended their season, and drought is expanding, he notes.

"I'm pessimistic," Pilkey says. "I don't think people will do anything about climate change until there's a global catastrophe, like sea level rise." The most likely projection is that a combination of glacier melt and thermal expansion will cause the oceans to rise about 40 inches. "The problem," Pilkey says, "is that people around the world have built on the beaches."

Meanwhile, some coastal regions are already feeling the impacts of a rising ocean. Residents near Washaway Beach in Washington State have seen the ocean claim 100 feet of shoreline a year over the past century. And the Inuit village of Shishmaref, Alaska, is facing similar problems. Rising temperatures have reduced the sea ice which buffers the town from storm surges, says Pilkey. Now the permafrost beneath the village has begun to melt, making the shoreline more vulnerable to erosion. Like residents of Washaway to the south, the Inuit are losing homes and the town's infrastructure is being undermined.

"There's a tsunami of anti-intelligence on this issue," says Pilkey. Education is key to changing course, but people aren't paying attention to the science. It's the art and storytelling that engage people, and Pilkey believes the only hope to addressing climate change is to get people talking about it. That's what guides him to collaborate with Fraser; her art will engage people in those essential conversations.

Fraser is already working on batiks for their next collaboration. "There will be so many refugees leaving their homes because of flooding due to climate change," she says. The next book will focus on finding refuge from the expanding oceans.

The "Expanding Oceans" exhibit runs through May 13. For hours and museum information call 273-6623 or go to [www.museumoftheearth.org](http://www.museumoftheearth.org).

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